

Crossing the James River, June 1864

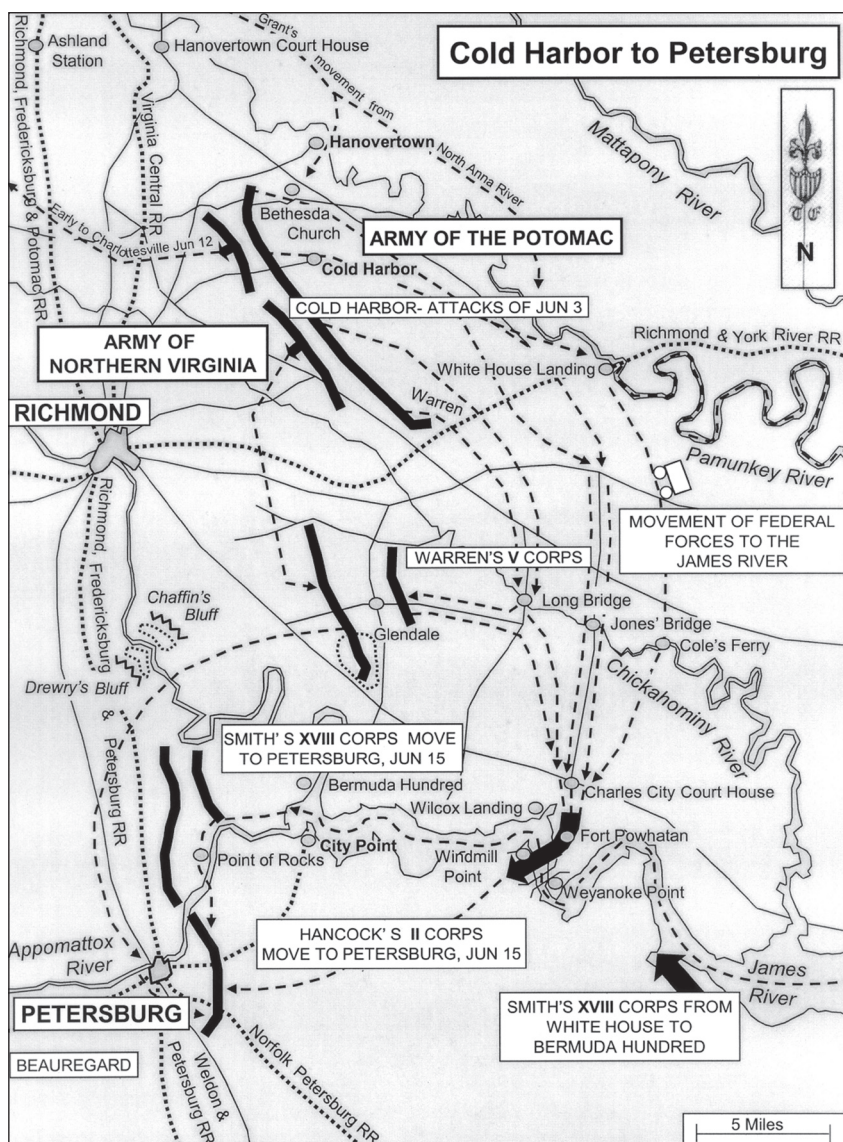
“...the real crisis of the war”

By Mr. Gustav J. Person

The Overland Campaign began on 4 May 1864. What followed were 45 days of continuous marching, fighting and digging. It was the fourth year of the Civil War, and Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant had been brought east to command all the Union armies and end the war. He had planned a coordinated series of simultaneous offensives to deny the Confederates the ability to redistribute their forces to meet these attacks. Grant knew that Virginia would continue to be the main theater of the war, and he chose to make his headquarters in the field with the Army of the Potomac, commanded by Major General George G. Meade. Facing that force would be General Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

Grant's New Target: Petersburg

Up until then, the war in the Eastern Theater had not gone well for the Union, and Grant had faced strong opposition and heavy casualties as the Army of the Potomac fought its way south from the area around Fredericksburg toward Richmond. Sidestepping Lee's army repeatedly, both armies came to rest at Cold Harbor, just eight miles east of the Confederate capital. A stalemate ensued as the opposing armies dug in extensively after the failure of the Federal assaults on the morning of 3 June. The armies would remain in place under hot, fetid conditions for the next 9 days. The Confederates had faced difficult situations before, but Brigadier General E. Porter Alexander proclaimed this as the “real crisis of the war.”¹ Grant now determined to change his strategy. His new target would be the Confederate commercial and transportation hub at Petersburg, 20 miles south of Richmond along the Appomattox River. By capturing Petersburg, Grant could easily starve the Southerners out of their defenses around Richmond, which would allow him to defeat them on open ground of his



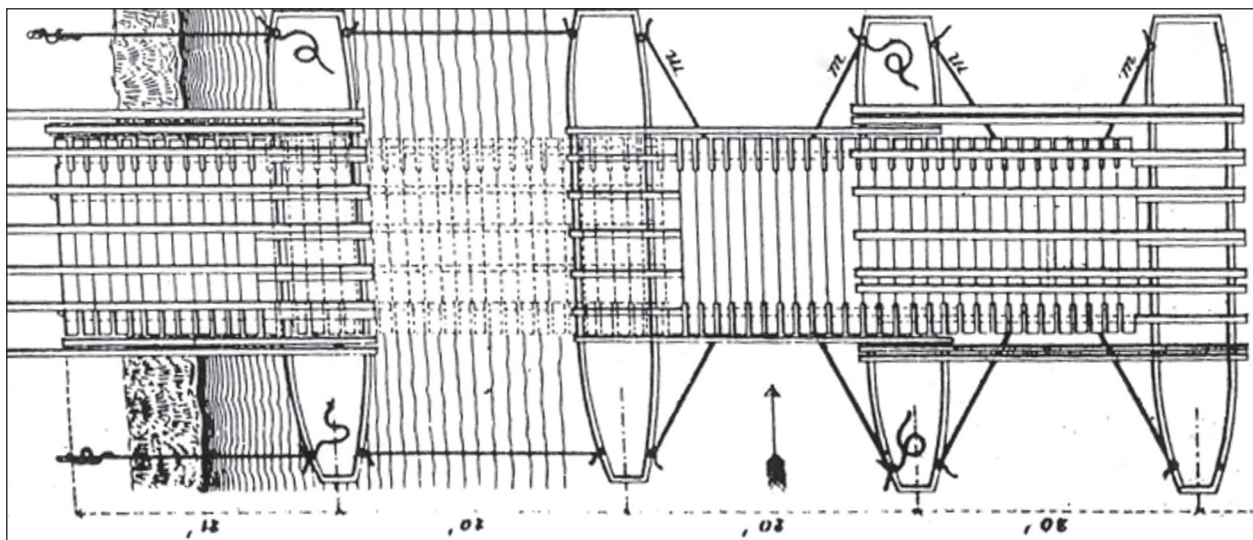
Map of Cold Harbor to Petersburg

own choosing. To do that, he would have to steal a march on the Confederates, cross the James River undetected to the south, and capture Petersburg by a *coup de main* before the Confederates could react.²

Grant devised a complex, masterful plan that involved joint and combined actions and the operations of an army group—including the Army of the Potomac and the Army of

Map courtesy MSG Paul Jenkins, USA (Ret.)

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Courtesy CPT James C. Duane, Manual for Engineer Troops, 1862

Diagram of the construction of a ponton bridge

the James under Major General Benjamin Butler, and the Union Army engineers would play a vital role. The Engineer Brigade of the Army of the Potomac had already performed Herculean tasks since the beginning of the campaign. They had erected 38 ponton bridges with an aggregate length of 6,458 feet. Major Nathaniel Michler, acting chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac, later remarked that “the facility, ease and promptness with which a thoroughly trained body of engineer troops can accomplish such important duties, also bear testimony to the zeal, energy, and ability displayed by both officers and men, and to the important services rendered by this arm of the service, not only during the weary marches of a long and trying campaign, but also in the preparation and execution of the more tedious [later] operations of the siege [of Petersburg].”³

Benham's Brigade

General Meade had an efficient force of engineer troops, including Captain George H. Mendell's United States Engineer Battalion, consisting of 4 companies. Brigadier General Henry W. Benham's Volunteer Engineer Brigade, like the regular battalion, had served with the Army of the Potomac since late 1861. It was a seasoned unit of volunteers, originally consisting of the 15th and 50th New York Volunteer Engineer Regiments. Soon after Chancellorsville in May 1863, most of the 15th New York were mustered out of service after their 2-year enlistments expired. Its few remaining companies, composed of 3-year enlistees, were detailed to behind-the-lines duty, but the 50th New York, now commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ira Spaulding, remained with the Army of



Photo, by Timothy O'Sullivan, courtesy Library of Congress

Camp of the 50th New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment at Rappahannock Station, Winter 1864. The ponton bridge train is at left.



Photo by Brady & Co., courtesy Library of Congress

Ponton bridge over the James River at Weyanoke Point

the Potomac throughout the war. The 50th consisted of 11 companies, divided into 4 battalions, with 40 officers and 1,500 enlisted men. During the Overland Campaign, the battalions had been parceled out to support the different corps of Meade's army. Benham and most of the 15th were at the Engineer Depot in Washington, D.C., at the beginning of the Overland Campaign. He transferred the 15th and his headquarters to Fortress Monroe when that place became the forward engineer base for Grant's operations in late May. General Butler's own Army of the James engineer troops consisted of 8 companies of the 1st New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, commanded by Colonel Edward W. Serrell.⁴

On the afternoon of 6 June, Grant dispatched two of his *aides-de-camp*, Lieutenant Colonels Cyrus Comstock and Horace Porter, on a dual mission to the south. He sent them first to Bermuda Hundred to confer with General Butler and apprise him of the impending operation. Butler's Army of the James had moved up the James River from Fortress Monroe on 4–5 May and was now firmly entrenched in the peninsula bordered by the James and Appomattox Rivers.

In late May, Major General William F. "Baldy" Smith's XVIII Army Corps of the Army of the James had been detached to reenforce the Army of the Potomac and was currently entrenched in the Union line at Cold Harbor. Grant intended to embark that corps at White House Landing on the Pamunkey River, have it steam 150 miles around the James peninsula, and lead the attack on Petersburg from Bermuda Hundred. Smith would cooperate with the II Army Corps, which would cross the James farther downstream. Comstock and Porter were then to select the best crossing point on the river for the ponton bridge site, taking into consideration the necessity of choosing a place "which

will give the Army of the Potomac as short a line of march as practicable, and which at the same time be far enough downstream to allow for a sufficient distance between it and the present position of Lee's army to prevent the chances of our being attacked successfully while in the act of crossing."⁵ The pair returned to Grant's headquarters on 12 June, noting that the principal advantage of the selected point near Fort Powhatan was that "it was the narrowest point that could be found on the river below City Point."⁶

Grant had foreseen the possibility of crossing the James as early as 15 April, when he ordered General Benham to gather and hold at Fortress Monroe sufficient water transport to tow necessary quantities of bridge-building materials to span the James. At 0900 on 13 June, the Union Army would begin to disengage from the defenses behind Cold Harbor. Grant's careful planning had already paid dividends when he ordered the ponton boats upriver around noon on 4 June. One hundred and fifty-five ponton boats with their attendant bridging equipment had quickly gone to Bermuda Hundred, and the additional battalion bridge trains from the 50th New York were ordered south.⁷

Four Coordinated Columns

Meade's talented chief-of-staff, Major General Andrew A. Humphreys, late of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, was directed to draft the operations order. In broad outline, Humphreys detailed that the Army of the Potomac would evacuate Cold Harbor in four coordinated columns. The operation was to begin with V and II Army Corps crossing the Chickahominy River at Long Bridge. Engineers of the 50th New York were detailed to build a 1,200-foot-long ponton bridge across this watercourse, requiring extensive use of corduroy approaches

because of the surrounding swampy terrain. Once over, V Corps turned west to the 1862 battlefield at Glendale to provide a screening and blocking force and to create the impression that Grant intended to launch an offensive north of the James toward Richmond. Once in place, V Corps occupied a 5-mile defensive position from the White Oak Swamp to Malvern Hill. The 3d Cavalry Division of Major General Philip Sheridan's Cavalry Corps reenforced Major General Gouverneur Warren's V Corps for this mission. Simultaneously, VI and IX Army Corps were to follow separate routes to Jones' Bridge on the Chickahominy east of Warren and continue on to Charles City Court House. A third column, made up of the army's trains and accompanied by Brigadier General Edward Ferrero's division of United States Colored Troops as a guard force, was to cross the Chickahominy east of Jones' Bridge and pursue a more remote network to the James. Ultimately, the trains crossed at Cole's Ferry on the Chickahominy, but were delayed at least 30 hours by the shortage of bridging material. While the first three columns funneled south toward Charles City Court House, Smith's fourth column marched to White House Landing to embark for Bermuda Hundred. If all went according to plan, two days of maneuver should see Smith arriving at Bermuda Hundred and the Army of the Potomac crossing the James on a combination of ferry and ponton bridging—and marching on Petersburg unopposed.⁸

In its four years of existence, the Army of the Potomac made many mistakes and often paid a high price; yet the army was always able to conduct a withdrawal under enemy contact without any interference. So it was at Cold Harbor

as Warren's corps, on the extreme right flank, disengaged and moved back to assembly areas behind the lines on the night of 11 June. The remainder of the army moved back shortly after dusk on the following day, filling a 7-mile-long fortification that had been hastily built by 1,720 men of VI Corps and the United States Engineer Battalion.

Detailed Reconnaissance

On 12 June, Brigadier General Godfrey Weitzel, chief engineer of the Army of the James, directed his assistant, Lieutenant Peter S. Michie, CE (United States Military Academy, Class of 1863), to make a detailed reconnaissance of the river-crossing areas in the vicinity of Fort Powhatan. His report examined three locations and concentrated on Wilcox Landing for a ferry site, 3/4 of a mile upstream from Fort Powhatan, and Weyanoke Point for the bridge site, 3 miles downstream. The width of the river at the latter point spanned 1,992 feet. The landward approaches would require considerable clearance of trees and an extensive trestle ramp. The James River was a navigable tidal stream for 108.8 miles from its mouth to Richmond. At Weyanoke Point, the narrow river channel averaged 85 to 90 feet (about 15 fathoms) deep, and the swift tidal river rose and receded 3 to 4 feet each day. Meanwhile, Major Michler was directed by headquarters, Army of the Potomac, to select a line to be occupied as an entrenched bridgehead position covering the crossing sites. By the evening of 14 June, the entire army—less the army trains and the cavalry—had arrived within the bridgehead. On the following day, Michler also selected a shorter line to be entrenched below Queen's Creek as the line contracted.⁹



Photo. by Brady & Co., courtesy Library of Congress

Ponton bridge over the James River from the South Shore

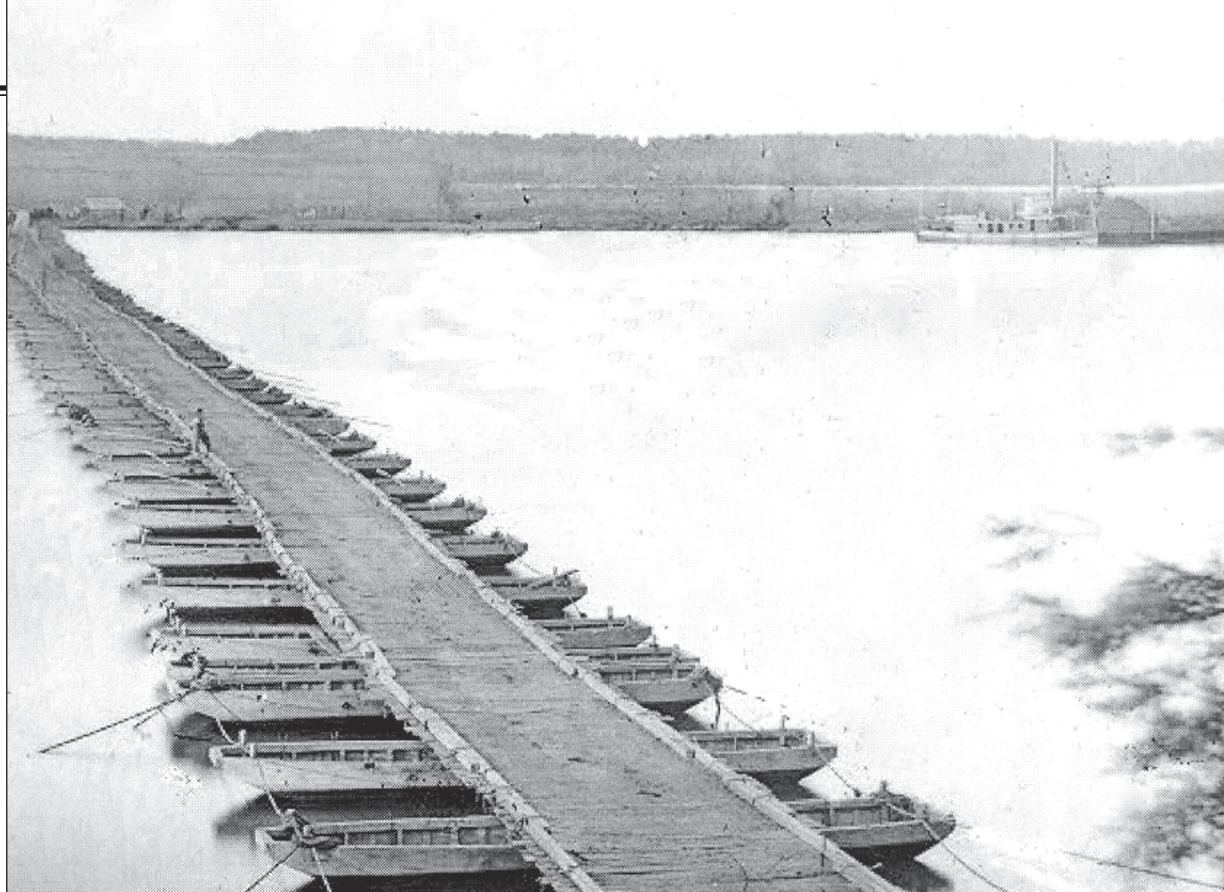


Photo courtesy Library of Congress

Ponton bridge at Jones' Bridge over the Chickahominy River

Robert E. Lee's problem lay not in being surprised by Grant's move, but in being unsure as to its ultimate objective. General P.G.T. Beauregard, commanding the Department of North Carolina and Southern Virginia at Petersburg, had suggested as early as 7 June that Grant would likely cross the James and strike Richmond from Bermuda Hundred. Lee seriously considered the possibility that Grant would cross the Chickahominy, but remain north of the James and advance toward Richmond in conjunction with Butler on the south side of the river.¹⁰

Scene of Confusion

On 12 June, the United States Engineer Battalion moved out in full marching order at 1500. They crossed the Chickahominy about 24 hours later on the ponton bridge at Jones' Bridge laid by the 50th New York. On the far side, they awaited the passage of VI Corps and then marched to Charles City Court House where camp was made. Replacement uniforms and rations were issued. On 14 June, the battalion moved out around 1100 and 3 hours later went into bivouac at Weyanoke Point. At 1500, the men fell in without arms and proceeded a short distance down the bank. Brigadier General Weitzel was there with several companies of the 1st New York. The area was a scene of confusion, and nothing had been done toward erection of the bridge. As noted previously, the ponton material had been transported to Bermuda Hundred in early June—and then, inexplicably, moved back to Fortress Monroe on 12 June. It would take another 24 hours to reposition all that equipment at Weyanoke Point.

Not to be delayed further, the detachment of 200 U.S. engineers, at the word of command and led by its noncommissioned officers, sprang into the slimy, muddy water (which was almost up to the neck) and succeeded in building—in 1 hour—an abutment of trestle work some 150 feet long through the soft marshes, reaching into the deep water proper—arguably the hardest part of the entire project. The battalion was then transferred to work on the opposite shore, with volunteer engineers taking up the work at Weyanoke Point. General Benham had arrived around noon from Fortress Monroe with portions of the 15th New York and a number of vessels with the bridge materials in tow. He was soon joined by an additional detachment of 220 men and a bridge train of the 50th New York, preceding the army. Major James C. Duane, chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac, turned over the completion of the bridge to Benham. As fast as the materials could be unloaded from the vessels, they were made into “rafts” of six ponton boats and rowed into position in the bridge. The bridge was built simultaneously from both shores by successive rafts, a process well described in Major Duane's *Manual for Engineer Troops*, published in 1862.¹¹

French Army Equipment and Doctrine Adopted

During the 1850s and 1860s, the French army was considered by many of the world's armies as the epitome of efficiency, innovation, and success. Operations in North Africa, the Crimea, Northern Italy, and Mexico were widely studied, and behind all that was the

ghost of the great Napoleon, a military leader to be emulated. Much of the French army equipment and doctrine was copied by the United States Army, and especially military engineering. The army soon adopted the French bridge train and the heavy wooden ponton boats, the latter each weighing 1,600 pounds. The weight and bulk of the boats were necessary to provide the buoyancy necessary to support large bodies of troops and heavy wheeled vehicles. The boats and transport wagons were strong enough for use under the harshest conditions. The equipment was so serviceable that it would remain, with remarkably little change, as the standard for the army until the First World War.¹²

Not to be delayed by the erection of the bridge, most of the infantry of three corps (II, V, and VI) began ferrying across the James at Wilcox Landing on the morning of 14 June. Major Wesley Brainerd and his battalion of the 50th New York (Companies B, F, and G) had already arrived to repair the wharves there. Later that evening, he was ordered directly across the river to Windmill Point to construct an additional wharf for the use of the follow-on troops. Federal officers had gathered a varied flotilla of steamers and ferries to carry the huge army. The 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment of the II Corps crossed from Wilcox Landing on the *Thomas Powell*, a steamer that normally cruised the less-troubled waters of the Hudson River. The ferrying operation consumed about 62 hours and required 12 hours to ferry the infantry of each corps. If available, the same troops might have marched over the bridge in not more than one-fourth the time. About noon, or shortly after the corps began to cross, the steamers carrying the XVIII Corps began to pass Windmill Point, en route to rejoin the Army of the James. Major General “Baldy” Smith, commanding the corps, was aboard the leading steamer. Thus, the troops marching overland and those moved by water met simultaneously at the same place on the James River.¹³

The engineers began assembling the ponton bridge around 1600 on 14 June, after a further delay to allow the river passage of the XVIII Corps past Weyanoke Point. The bridge, completed seven hours later, was 2,170 feet long and used 101 ponton boats. It was constructed with “normal intervals” providing 20-foot spans—center-to-center of boats. Planking called *chess*, laid across balks (stringers), provided a roadway 11 feet wide between guardrails. To permit the passage of vessels upstream and downstream as required, a draw 100 feet wide was incorporated in the bridge in the river channel. This draw, constructed of ponton rafts, could be disengaged and floated out with the current to open the draw. To anchor the bridge in the swift current, three schooners were positioned abreast above the bridge and three below the bridge, under the direction of General Weitzel.¹⁴

Joint Operation

A notable aspect of the operation was its jointness. Some Confederate gunboats still patrolled the river near Richmond. Besides providing a security force, the United States Navy, under Acting Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee, was ordered to sink four schooners, moored

with chains fore and aft in the main channel, and one in the narrower channel in the river, 800 yards above Aiken’s Landing toward Richmond, to prevent hostile gunboats from attempting to steam downstream past the Union naval vessels.¹⁵

At the time of the crossing, Grant estimated the combined strength of the Armies of the Potomac and the James at about 115,000, even though half of the artillery was sent back to Washington, and many men were discharged by expiration of their term of service. Although General Meade ordered IX Corps to begin crossing immediately, the first troops did not start crossing the bridge until 0600 on 15 June—yet the bridge was fully operational at 0100. Meade directed Benham to provide overall supervision of the crossing. Except for five hours on 15 June, from 0600 that day until 0930 on 17 June, the bridge was in constant use—a total of 46 hours. The personnel, animals, and vehicles of the army crossed without incident, as follows: IX Corps troops and trains; XVIII Corps trains, artillery and an infantry brigade as train guard; an artillery brigade of VI Corps; army trains; V Corps trains and artillery; army headquarters; 2d Division, VI Corps; VI Corps trains and artillery; 3d Cavalry Division; remainder of the army trains; and finally, 4th Division, IX Corps. The army trains, including several thousand wagons and a herd of 2,000 to 3,000 cattle, required at least 31 hours to cross and were about 50 miles in total length.¹⁶

A Noble River

The crossing greatly uplifted the morale and spirits of the men who were out of the horrid trenches at Cold Harbor, and weary from the hot, dusty march from the Chickahominy. They were able to enjoy the beautiful green vistas along the river. Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman of Meade’s staff asserted that “to appreciate such a sight you must pass five weeks in an almost unbroken wilderness, with no sights but weary, dusty troops, endless wagon trains, convoys of poor wounded men, and hot, uncomfortable camps. Here was a noble river....”¹⁷ As the 7th Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry Regiment reached the James, its brigade band serenaded them with “Ain’t I Glad to Get Out of the Wilderness.”¹⁸ The band had dramatically summed up the feelings of the army.

The V Corps chief of artillery, Colonel Charles Wainwright, was equally impressed with the bridge. It was “really a wonderful piece of pontooning [sic], equal I suspect to anything of the sort ever done before.” He found it to be “very steady in crossing, nor has there been the slightest trouble as far as I can learn.”¹⁹

During these critical days, an anxious Beauregard continued to press Lee and the Richmond government for additional troops, citing the large-scale movements on the river and his own troop shortages. Meanwhile, with all the troops safely across the river, the bridge was disassembled on 17 June, and its components towed upriver to Bermuda Hundred and City Point. It still reputedly holds the world’s record as the longest temporary military bridge in modern

history, and the contribution of the engineers was a credit to them and the army.

Overwhelming Advantage

While the river crossing is regarded as brilliantly conceived and almost flawlessly executed, the full story in those hectic days of mid-June was not over. Grant's planning had enabled "Baldy" Smith to reach Petersburg with an overwhelming advantage in numbers. His 14,000 men opposed a mere 2,200 Confederates, who were supported by about 2,000 militiamen in the so-called Dimmock Line. The bulk of Lee's army was still miles away on their march from Cold Harbor. After crossing the Appomattox River from Bermuda Hundred on a ponton bridge at Point of Rocks, Smith concentrated his force at City Point and then approached Petersburg, receiving artillery fire from the Dimmock Line in midafternoon on 15 June. After a prolonged reconnaissance, his attack finally went in at 1900 and cracked open a mile of the Dimmock Line with astonishing ease. At least eight Confederate battery positions fell to the Federal assault. Almost inexplicably, he stopped, although Petersburg lay wide open before him. Major General Winfield S. Hancock's II Army Corps had crossed by ferry the previous day. He had been ordered to support Smith, but was delayed by confusing orders, a lack of guides and adequate maps, and the need to draw rations. By then, darkness had fallen, and the arrival of Major General Robert F. Hoke's division of 5,000 men from the Army of Northern Virginia sealed the breach. It had been a close-run thing indeed, and the siege of Petersburg would now go on for another 9 months.²⁰



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